

HOMŒOPATHY: 3.

A LETTER TO J. S. S., ESQ.

BY

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HOMŒOPATHY.

DEAR SIR,

You desire me to give you my opinion of what is called Homœopathy. I can do so without any great labour to myself, and without making any exorbitant demand on your patience, as the question really lies in very small compass, and what I have to say on it may be expressed in very few words.

The subject may be viewed under different aspects. We may inquire, first, whether Homœopathy be, of itself, of any value, or of no value at all? secondly, in what manner does it affect general society? and thirdly, in what relation does it stand to the medical profession?

I must first request of you to observe that, whatever I may think at present, I had originally no prejudice either in favour of or against this new system: nor do I believe that the members of the medical profession generally were in the first instance influenced by any feelings of this kind. The fact is, that the fault of the profession for the most part lies in the opposite direction. They are too much inclined to adopt any new theory or any new mode of treatment that may have been proposed; the younger and more inexperienced among them especially erring in this respect, and too frequently indulging themselves in the trial of novelties, disregarding old and established remedies. For myself, I assure you that, whatever opinion I may now hold, it has not been hastily formed. I have made myself sufficiently acquainted with several works which profess to disclose the mysteries of Homœopathy, especially that of Hahnemann, the founder of the Homœopathic sect, and those of Dr. Curie and Mr. Sharpe. The result is, that, with all the pains that I have been able to take, I have been unable to form any very distinct notion of the system which they profess to teach. They all indeed begin with laying down, as the foundation of it, the rule that *similia similibus curantur*; or, in plain English, that one disease is to be driven out of

in which there is a greater chance of too much than too little being done for the patient ; and if a patient under such circumstances becomes the subject of Homœopathic treatment, this being no treatment at all, he actually derives benefit from the change.

In a discourse to which I have already alluded, I thought it my duty to offer the following caution to my pupils :— ‘ the first question which should present itself to you in the management of a particular case is this : Is the disease one of which the patient may recover or is it not ? There are indeed too many cases in which the patient’s condition is so manifestly hopeless, that the fact cannot be overlooked. Let me, however, caution you that you do not in any instance arrive too hastily at this conclusion. Our knowledge is not so absolute and certain as to prevent even well-informed persons being occasionally mistaken on this point. This is true, especially with respect to the affections of internal organs. Individuals have been restored to health who were supposed to be dying of disease in the lungs or mesenteric glands.’ * * * * * ‘ It is a good rule in the practice of our art, as in the common affairs of life, for us to look on the favourable side of the question, as far as we can consistently with reason do so.’ I might have added that hysterical affections are especially a source of error to not very experienced practitioners, by simulating more serious disease ; seeming to resist for a time all the efforts of art, and then all at once subsiding under any kind of treatment, or, just as well, under none at all. Now, if it should so happen that a medical practitioner, from want of knowledge, or from a natural defect of judgment, makes a mistake in his diagnosis, and the patient whom he had unsuccessfully treated afterwards recovers under the care of another practitioner, it is simply said ‘ Dr. A. was mistaken ;’ and it is not considered as anything very remarkable that the symptoms should subside under the care of Dr. B. But if, on the other hand, the recovery takes place under the care of a Homœopathist, or any other empiric, the circumstance excites a much larger portion of attention ; and we really cannot very well wonder that, with such knowledge as they possess of these matters, the empiric should gain much credit with the public.

So far the practical result would seem to be that Homœopathy can be productive of no great harm ; and indeed, considering it to be no treatment at all, whenever it is a substitute for bad treatment, it must be the better of the two.

But there is great harm nevertheless. There are numerous cases in which spontaneous recovery is out of the question ; in which sometimes the life or death of the patient, and at other times the comfort or discomfort of his existence for a long time to come, depends on the prompt application of active and judicious treatment. In such cases Homœopathy is neither more nor less than a mischievous absurdity ; and I do not hesitate to say that a very large number of persons have fallen victims to the faith which they reposed in it, and to the consequent delay in having recourse to the use of proper remedies. It is true that it very rarely happens, when any symptoms show themselves which give real alarm to the patient or his friends, that they do not dismiss the Homœopathist and send for a regular practitioner ; but it may well be that by this time the mischief is done, the case being advanced beyond the reach of art.

That the habit of resorting to Homœopathic treatment which has prevailed in some parts of society should have occasioned much dissatisfaction among the mass of medical practitioners, is no matter of wonder. It cannot be otherwise than provoking, to those who have passed three or four years of the best part of their lives in endeavouring to make themselves well acquainted with disease, in the wards of a hospital, to find that there are some among their patients who resort to them for advice only when their complaints have assumed a more painful or dangerous character ; while they are set aside in ordinary cases, which involve a smaller amount of anxiety and responsibility, in favour of some Homœopathic doctor, who, very probably, never studied disease at all. But it cannot be helped. In all times there have been pretenders, who have persuaded a certain part of the public that they have some peculiar knowledge of a royal road to cure, which those of the regular craft have not. It is Homœopathy now ; it was something else formerly ; and if Homœopathy were to be extinguished, there would be something else in its place. The medical profession must be contented to let the thing take its course ; and they will best consult their own dignity, and the good of the public, by saying as little as possible about it. The discussions as to the evils of Homœopathy which have sometimes taken place at public meetings, have quite an opposite effect to that which they were intended to produce. They have led some to believe that Homœopathists are rather a persecuted race, and have given to the system which they pursue an importance which it would never have had otherwise ; just as any

absurd or fanatical sect in religion would gain proselytes if it could only make others believe that it was an object of jealousy and persecution. After all, the harm done to the regular profession is not so great as many suppose it to be ; a very large proportion of the complaints about which Homœopathists are consulted being really no complaints at all, for which a respectable practitioner would scarcely think it right to prescribe.

There was a time when many of the medical profession held the opinion that not only Homœopathy, but all other kinds of quackery, ought to be put down by the strong hand of the law. I imagine that there are very few who hold that opinion now. The fact is, that the thing is impossible ; and even if it were possible—as it is plain that the profession cannot do all that is wanted of them, by curing all kinds of disease, and making men immortal—such an interference with the liberty of individuals to consult whom they please would be absurd and wrong. As it now is, the law forbids the employment in any public institution of any one who is not registered as being a qualified medical practitioner, after a due examination by some of the constituted authorities ; and it can go no further. The only effectual opposition which the medical profession can offer to Homœopathy, is by individually taking all possible pains to avoid, on their own part, those errors of diagnosis by means of which, more than anything else, the professors of Homœopathy thrive and flourish ; by continuing in all ways to act honourably by the public ; at the same time, never being induced, either by good nature or by any motives of self-interest, to appear to give their sanction to a system which they know to have no foundation in reality. To join with Homœopathists in attendance on cases of either medical or surgical disease, would be neither wise nor honest. The object of a medical consultation is the good of the patient ; and we cannot suppose that any such result can arise from the interchange of opinions, where the views entertained, or professed to be entertained, by one of the parties as to the nature and treatment of disease, are wholly unintelligible to the other.

I am, dear Sir,

Yours, &c.

B. C. BRODIE.